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Building Collaborations Across Child Welfare and Education Systems

MINNESOTA CHILD WELFARE AND EDUCATION FOCUS GROUP REPORT

By Sara Langworthy, Ph.D., Lauren Robertson, B.A., Sanjana Bhakta, B.A.



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BACKGROUND AND METHODOLOGY



Children involved in the child welfare system often experience substantial barriers to achieving academic success (National Working Group on Foster Care and Education, 2014, <http://ow.ly/WM3Fm>). Minnesota, like many states, continues to struggle with meeting conformity for the national Child & Family Services Review (<http://ow.ly/WM3Uw>) indicator related to educational well-being. Child welfare and education systems are complexly inter-related, but traditionally isolated. Inefficient systems and limited collaboration across sectors often lead to overtaxing front-line social service and education professionals working with children and families. As a result, professionals are often unable to provide the highest level of service to their clients.

In order to gain a better understanding of the challenges facing professionals working in child welfare and education systems in Minnesota, we asked social service and education professionals to identify barriers to collaborating across systems and implementing best practices. To gather initial information on how professionals who work in child welfare and education facilitate collaboration across systems, we conducted a brief online survey in spring 2014 (see Collaboration Across Minnesota Child Welfare and Education Systems report at <http://z.umn.edu/cwelcreport>).

Building on the results of the survey, we held eight focus groups across Minnesota where direct-service professionals from child welfare and education sectors discussed barriers to, as well as creative strategies for, enabling work across systems. All focus group conversations included people representing both child welfare and education sectors. Several professionals who worked in other social service fields such as mental health and child protection were also involved in focus groups.

Questions in these focus groups asked professionals to reflect on useful efforts for collaboration, effective communication practices, and practical suggestions for new professionals working with children and families (for a full list of questions, see Appendix). The central question asked people to think creatively from their perspective as professionals working directly with children and families to re-design the ways child welfare and education systems operate. An experienced facilitator led the focus groups across all eight sites. All conversations were audio recorded and subsequently transcribed and coded.

Key Results

Fifty-two people (88 percent female, 58 percent in their profession for over 16 years, 63 percent working with children under age 18, 62 percent serving Twin Cities metropolitan counties) participated in these focus groups held across the state. Of the 52 participants, 36 percent worked in county social services, 42 percent worked in school systems, and the remainder indicated working with both systems, e.g., mental health and other in-home service providers working directly with both systems.

Main Messages

Our analysis uncovered four key takeaway messages:

1. **High Quality.** Social service and education professionals work long and hard to provide the highest quality services for children and families, despite numerous obstacles.
2. **System Barriers.** Child welfare and education system structures, rules, and regulations hinder high-quality social services and education for children and families.
3. **Data, Data, Data.** Data reporting and sharing practices currently serve as barriers rather than resources to professionals, and having reliable up-to-date information was recognized as a valuable missing piece of high-quality practice.
4. **Creative Solutions.** Front-line social service professionals and educators have developed creative, functional strategies for addressing the complex problems facing child welfare and education systems in Minnesota.

HIGH QUALITY

“Relationship-building amongst the professionals is so important...when everyone is joined for a common goal for this child to be able to function at their ultimate level. And we all have different perspectives, and we all have different roles, but how can we all work together to make that happen?”

Throughout the focus group conversations, several factors emerged as necessary in order for professionals to provide the highest quality services for their clients, including building relationships, accessing resources, and focusing on strengths.

Relationships and Collaboratives

Professionals repeatedly emphasized the need to build relationships with other professionals across systems in order to provide effective services for their clients. Phone calls, in-person meetings, and email were cited as the most often used communication methods. Most professionals preferred face-to-face meetings because they allow for more relationship development. However, as one professional noted, “**You need to collaborate but you don’t get paid for any of that time.**” Professionals repeatedly emphasized the need for opportunities to connect with their peers across sectors in order to better meet client needs.



Building relationships across sectors and professional silos can occur through social service collaboratives and case planning meetings. To foster this type of multi-disciplinary work, some parts of the state have established structured social service collaboratives where professionals across systems and county lines meet and discuss pressing challenges. Professionals identified two main types of collaboratives: site-specific and client-specific.

Site-Specific

Site-specific collaboratives allow professionals across disciplines within a geographical area to regularly gather and discuss common challenges and opportunities. These meetings are not specific to individual clients, but provide an important opportunity for professional relationship building, learning, and resource sharing. **“It’s a quarterly meeting [where] they have school and county social workers meet together. Sometimes it’s for a couple of hours, sometimes it’s about training; it’s not necessarily about people [or] individual clients, but more about systems.”**

Client-Specific

Client-specific meetings, such as case planning or Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings about, or with, individual clients allow all professionals involved in a case to come together to discuss challenges and solutions. “[The meeting] incorporates all these people, including the child if the child is old enough, and we sit down and we talk about that case plan that the child protection worker has developed and everybody’s part in that case plan and development.”

Resources

Professionals frequently discussed the importance of resources, (e.g. monetary, staffing, services) in their ability to provide high-quality services for children and families. Caseload size was often cited as a major factor in the ability of professionals to provide high-quality services. Due to budget cuts, professionals’ caseloads have increased and become difficult to manage. One professional commented, **“Yeah, you save a little money. We’re not going to hire so many social workers — we’ll just load more work on them; but what does that cost in the long run of things?”**

In addition, staffing turnover was cited as a barrier for maintaining continuity and enabling relationship building with children and families, as well as other social service providers. “I think turnover in these agencies [is a problem,] too; there’s half a dozen that we use for in home services and their people come and go, so you don’t get that relationship going for the kid.”



Through collaboratives and other relationship-building opportunities, practitioners learn about ways to leverage one another’s resources and services. “I would say with us a true collaboration is sharing the money. You never know what grants are out there, or what grant they’re working on that they might have some money to share.”

Flexibility in how professionals use funds to best support families was also cited as important. Professionals wanted more leeway to use the resources in the ways that they see

fit based on client needs. Overall, knowledge of other community organizations or agencies that might be able to provide services for a family is a useful tool for professionals. One professional said, “I think in our county we’re just lucky we have a lot of services that we can provide kids without having them to go long distances.”

Focus on Strengths

Professionals frequently emphasized the need to remember that they are doing the best they can with what they have. So are their clients. Professionals readily noted the importance of recognizing their clients' strengths. One professional commented, **"I think if we didn't believe that parents were doing their best with the skills that they had, we couldn't do the jobs that we do. I don't think any parent wakes up in the morning and is trying to screw their kid up. They're doing the best that they can...I have never met a child either that is trying to be naughty. There's always a function behind the behavior that they have and it's working together to figure out what that is."**

TIPS FOR NEW PROFESSIONALS:

Make connections, always. When starting a new job, reach out repeatedly to people across organizations and systems to get the lay of the land. This aids in gaining knowledge about different systems.

"One of my first [recommendations] would be making lots and lots of phone calls. If you sit in your office and wait for connections to happen they're not going to."

If at first you don't succeed, try, try... and try again. Sometimes you won't get through to other professionals right away. Keep trying and remember that others are doing the best they can.

"A big piece of the communication is making sure that in my head I am trusting that the other [person] is doing their very best...I think sometimes it's really easy for us just in our frustration to jump to 'they're not doing anything' or to start pointing fingers. So I think it's really important to keep that communication going...because sometimes it's frustrating. There aren't easy answers. Everybody is working super hard, we're still not getting anywhere, the kid is still suffering, and it's crazy making. So in that process when we start to blame other people I think communication breaks down."

Figure out who has the information you need. Sometimes the person at the front desk is the best way to get the information you need.

"You need to know who to talk to in every school. In one school it may be the principal; in another school it may be the social worker or counselor; in another school it's the [person] sitting at the front desk."

Learn about other professionals' roles in your families' lives. Often misunderstandings about roles can lead to increased tension and frustration. Talk to professionals from other systems about what you can and cannot do in your social service role.

"I think there's some misconceived ideas once in a while about what each system can do; you know [people say things like] 'I think the school system should be able to do ABC and D' and 'I think they think social services can do ABC and D.' Without having those conversations you've got those preconceived ideas [about what] they should have done."

Join social service collaboratives. If your community has a social service collaborative where you can gather to meet with professionals across disciplines, join it. Collaboratives are a great way to meet and build relationships with other professionals working with children and families in your area.

"Have communication. Seek them out. Don't wait for them to seek you out. Go introduce yourself. Go and ask people how you can be helpful as a new person as part of a collaborative."

Acknowledgement of other professionals' hard work was also a common theme. The majority of professionals attributed problems to the systems within which professionals operate rather than to individuals.

SYSTEM BARRIERS

"It doesn't have to be perfect, we know that, but just some of the systems have to change to really, truly meet the needs of the people that we [serve] in our communities."

After years of working with children and families in communities, professionals have identified how to provide high-quality services to their clients. Yet throughout these focus group conversations they expressed frustration with how the child welfare, education, criminal justice and human services systems, operate. Professionals often felt that these large systems created more barriers than solutions. As one professional said, **"If you're going to develop a system...it's like I'm a carpenter and you gave me a knife instead of a hammer. It's not working."**

Hierarchy, Rules, and Regulations

Some professionals were frustrated that people in leadership and decision-making positions had either never practiced in the field, or had not practiced for many years. Professionals described leaders as being out of touch with the realities faced by social service providers and educators. Many professionals discussed the challenges of excessive rules and regulations, along with cumbersome hierarchy, that prevented them from providing the best service to their clients. One professional commented, **"[We need] less red tape...we do a lot of talking about what can be done, and everyone's on the same page and then things sit for a week or two, and nothing gets accomplished."**

Many professionals agreed that out-of-date reporting systems and needlessly complicated processes place an extra burden on professionals and the families they serve. "A lot of times people who are really trying to get all their paperwork in have a hard time making sure they have everything signed [and turned] in because they're always missing one piece. And when they're missing the one piece, and the deadline comes, then [the service] just ends."



Professionals also reported that official procedures often substantially delay delivery of necessary services to families, prolonging their distress. Most professionals saw these delays as unnecessary, and that they could be minimized if systems were less antiquated and more flexible. One professional commented, "Why you can't get things on the computer so that somebody could just log in and put their number down and say 'oh, okay, that's the form I'm missing' and fill it out on the computer, and the computer won't give you the 'okay' confirmation until you've got

all your stuff put in...I mean we live in a computer [driven-world], why can't our forms [be] computerized?"

In addition, many professionals called for more autonomy and fewer required approvals when working with clients. Repeatedly professionals reported frustration at knowing what a client needed but not being able to provide a service because of overly restrictive rules and regulations. Extensive paperwork and procedures can further delay effective and necessary care for clients. One professional expressed frustration about how extensive paperwork delayed arranging transportation to school for a homeless student. Because of these delays, the student was out of school for several days when the situation could have been quickly remedied had the professional been allowed to provide an immediate solution: a bus card. Noting that such rules and regulations actually made it more difficult for a student to get to school, the professional said, “Just give me a stack of bus cards and let me make the decisions on what the needs are, you know what I mean? ...I know what needs to happen. I’m talking about small things...I’m just talking about [wanting] to get the kid [to school]...everything has just gotten so complicated...[let me] give the kid the bus card today so they can get to school tomorrow.”

Realities of Work

Professionals also recognized that the challenges and solutions in urban areas were different than those in rural areas of the state. Although metropolitan counties had access to more resources, their large systems were often described as more fragmented and cumbersome. In rural areas of the state, professionals said they had more stable relationships with other providers and organizations than in urban areas, but that limited staffing required them to “do it all.” One professional said, “I know in [a metropolitan county] the service system is really fragmented...you have a kid in foster care, they have a worker for that; they have a worker [who] just goes to court; they have a worker [who] works for the parent...but in [a rural county] we do it all. We do everything. So it’s really hard to be able to focus on the specific issues and have really great follow through because you’re being pulled 55 million different directions.”

Professionals also described the necessity of learning on the job. Although professionals receive training in social services and education, training does not prepare them for the realities of the job. One professional said, “So many of the young [women] and young men [who] come through our doors initially are going to save the world, and it takes a while to realize you are not going to save the world. You’re going to help a family, you’re going to help a child, but you are not going to save the world... some [new professionals] have not passed probation because they weren’t expecting to get doors slammed in their face.” Many professionals said that new workers need to be open to learning on the job, and supervisors need to be supportive and help their staff work through difficulties. **“[Mentoring] is a way to invest in your staff because they’re going to burn out quicker if they can’t deal with all the stuff that they’re seeing and hearing and thinking.”**

Professionals recognized that the systems meant to support families are overloaded and under resourced, and that with large systems, change is slow. However, they also noted that these conditions don’t change the fact that families’ needs are changing rapidly and must be addressed.



DATA, DATA, DATA

“I don’t find that kids come to school [having revealed] right away that they’re in foster care. And I’ve always wondered if there’s a way that school professionals...can get a heads up. Because a lot of times all the stuff will happen a week or two in, or everybody will be like ‘what is going on with Johnny?’ Whereas if we would have known, we might have set up some different structures.”

Professionals discussed the pros and cons of data gathering and sharing across systems. Although they emphasized the need for maintaining clients’ confidentiality, they also discussed the usefulness of establishing flexible data sharing practices. Real-time data sharing was lauded as an ideal way to improve professionals’ work. Professionals also described current data entry practices as too time consuming to be useful, and many acknowledged that it becomes a secondary priority in their case work as many are not paid for the time spent entering information into case files.

Reporting

As noted, many professionals are not paid for the time they spend data reporting, and most professionals find data entry time consuming and largely not beneficial to improving their practice. As one professional stated, **“It’s a waste of time. Ninety percent of our time we’re documenting [and] 10 percent we’re out in the field seeing kids; at least that’s the way it feels.”** Professionals acknowledge the necessity of up-to-date and useful data reporting, but cumbersome data systems do not allow them to easily enter and access information on their clients. Thus, professionals expressed a desire for a coordinated data reporting system across sectors. Professionals also viewed data reporting and sharing as a potential tool for building relationships with other professionals and agencies across sectors.

Confidentiality and Sharing

Professionals discussed the value and challenges of implementing data sharing efforts, including real-time data sharing systems. Because individual counties and school districts maintain slightly different policies and systems for sharing data, operating efficiently becomes a challenge. As one professional said, **“First it’s just hard to get information because of privacy and consents and lots of different things, but I’ve found it difficult to reach people and get the consents needed to share necessary information.”** In addition, one professional described the challenge when data releases were not available: “I think the biggest thing is the releases...because when a parent won’t sign a release for you guys to talk to the county or you guys to talk to the school, you’re stuck and that’s the barrier. Sometimes that barrier is huge.”

Although professionals acknowledged it is helpful to acquire more information on their clients or students, they expressed concern for their clients’ privacy and the challenges of requiring data releases. One focus group exchange in particular highlights the complexities of requiring families to share information with various providers:

Participant A) “Families [voluntarily providing information] are [sometimes] leery about you having a release with the school. If we’re talking about families in child protection...[where] the county is there not because [the family wants] them to be there, they’re not necessarily wanting the county to share with the school.”

Participant B) “...and then when you think about that from an ethical standpoint, maybe you have a family who has to sign a release because they’re involved with the courts, and the courts say you have to do that. But if it is somebody who...their

culture says ‘what happens in our family stays in our family, [it’s] nobody’s business’ then you have that double edge thing that you’re fighting.”

In summary, focus group results show that data sharing is an area for major improvement across systems. Professionals acknowledged the legal and technological challenges that creating a shared database might present for state agencies. But professionals need flexible, real-time information that is relevant to their students and families to provide the highest quality services for their clients.

CREATIVE SOLUTIONS

“That’s what I tell my clients when they say something nice about the professional. I say, ‘You know that piece of paper that I hang on the wall didn’t teach me to be a good human. That was what I learned in my childhood and growing up and I’m still learning.’ And that’s where the magic happens. It’s not about how educated you are, it’s about how compassionate, how empathetic, and how patient and supportive you can be.”

Throughout the focus group discussions, professionals cited potential solutions to some of the biggest barriers they face, including data sharing, collaborating across systems, and leveraging community resources. The comment above reflects one of the proposed solutions — a return to building relationships and making connections. Professionals were asked to think big and imagine how education and child welfare systems would operate in their utopia. Discussions included building state-wide systems to eliminate huge variability in services currently seen across county lines, providing a one-stop shop where families could go to one location and access all the services they need, and employing flexible real-time data sharing systems. These creative solutions shared by professionals across sectors are highlighted below in a need list, a want list, and a utopia list.



Needs List

1. State-Wide Consistency in Terminology and Processes

"I would like there to be some consistency amongst counties and amongst the states. We all have different acronyms, we all have different ways of saying certain things, we all have ways of entering our data. To have some statewide, nationwide consistency so that we all know what we’re talking about, we all know what we’re reading, and we all know what we’re saying."

2. Focus on Local Resources and Systems

"I feel like if you have more localized services, you're going to be more in touch with what's in that community...if you were localized you'd be such an expert at what's available... [something like] co-located social workers so each school district had a county social worker in that district to be a go-to person, but then your clients would [only be in] that district versus having kids in seven different districts."

3. Return to Building Relationships and Making Connections

"It really comes down to the people. I think with all the bureaucracy and everything we lose that relationship piece and that's where the change is going to take place, when you're actually connecting with the family and the clients and the professionals....You have to feel like the frustration of collaborating has to somehow be [decreased] so that we can find that connection and the joy [of] helping and seeing progress."

Want List

1. Coordinated Communication Structures

"I dream of the idea of some sort of hub where we're all communicating with each other [with a] nice app on our phones... some sort of central hub where we're all communicating with each other for the best needs of those kids."

2. Effective Data Sharing about Children's and Families' Lives

"Well, I think it would be nice if [professionals] were able to pull up services that are provided [to a client], or they could pull up the case plan, what the county's asking for, stuff like that....At least you could get what some of the recommendations are, what services have been provided, maybe medication for the child...legal background, and if there's some domestic stuff on there too. So if a worker is going out there, you're not like 'holy buckets what did I walk into?'"

3. One-Stop Shop to Meet Multiple Needs

"We have...Health Start clinics that provide the physical and mental health [care for adolescents]. When I worked in the school I found [these clinics] to be a very healthy, helpful resource for our kids and our families. I know there [are] also many buildings that have food shelves right in the schools, so I'm thinking like the one-stop shop kind of thing would be helpful for our families."

Utopia List

1. Wrap-Around Services that Ensure Trust and Accountability

"In my ideal world — it already exists or it has existed, we just don't see it in practice any more — and that's the whole wrap-around process where you had all the players at the table and everybody had a role [and] there was kind of a primary facilitator...When we did that I really felt we had results. Everyone knew what to expect from one another, there was a high level of progress made, and even comfort in knowing that [on] this team, everybody knew what everybody was doing. You didn't go back to your desk and think 'will she do it or won't she do it?' You knew that things were going to happen. I don't think I need to create it. I think it exists; I just don't think it happens anymore"

2. Prevention, not just Intervention: Attending to Larger Problems

"I think if we [didn't] have poverty, we wouldn't have a need for a lot of these services. Trying to end poverty and healing from historical trauma, teaching people at an early age how to deal with anxiety and depression — all of those things would eliminate a lot of these needs for family services. Really teaching people at a young age what is abuse, what does it look like, what to do if it's happening to you. Ending poverty is the real core of even needing these services."

3. Involve Direct Service Professionals in Making Decisions About Practice and Informing Policy

“I wonder then if it comes down to having the people at the top being able to take the time to come down to people at the bottom, and having some communication in there, and bringing it back up to make the decision so that people who are more [on] the bottom have an opportunity to...say ‘This is what we need. This is what’s going on.’ And [have] some more communication, some more systems put in place for those opportunities to happen.”

CONCLUSIONS

Across all focus groups, professionals acknowledged many common challenges they face across child welfare and education systems. Discussions centered on themes of system barriers, data sharing, and effective collaboration. Professionals emphasized the need for smaller caseloads, additional resources, and real-time data sharing. They also expressed the need for flexibility to use their expertise to assess difficult situations and make judgment calls without excessive oversight and regulation.

Several professionals commented that these focus groups were the first time they had ever been asked for their opinion on these issues. Many emphasized that front-line professional expertise would be valuable if infused into systems-level policy decision-making. Professionals called for effective data sharing and communication, preventive wrap-around services for families, and coordinated statewide systems that are nimble enough to address local needs. Professionals acknowledged the difficulties in reforming large systems, but stressed the importance of change in order to provide the best services possible for children and families across Minnesota.

APPENDIX

Focus Group Questions

1. Tell me about a time when you were able to successfully work with your colleagues in the other system to intervene and improve a student's success in school.
 - a. Probes: Who was present and involved in the process? What made that collaboration successful?
2. We know that effective communication between professionals is an important part of successful collaboration. **What does effective communication with other professionals look like to you?**
 - a. Probes: How do you work to communicate effectively with professionals from the other system? Are there methods, or timing of communications that you prefer? (Email? Phone? Regular client/staff meetings? Frequency?) How do you move forward when you have difficulty communicating with another professional? How can the leadership in your system or the other system better facilitate successful communication?
3. Now I'd like you to think about what you know about the inner workings of the other system. **How did you learn the ins and outs of the other system?**
 - a. Probes: What trainings or experiences have you found especially helpful in learning about the ins and outs of the other system? What trainings or experiences would you recommend for professionals from the other system who want to learn more about your system? If you're still learning in the ins and outs, what would you most like to know?
4. We know that different areas and communities of the state have very different needs and resources when it comes to providing services. **What are the biggest assets that you have in your area or community that make collaboration successful?**
 - a. Probes: What are the biggest barriers in your area to successful collaboration? What changes in your community would make collaboration more effective?
5. We've talked a lot about what successful collaboration looks like in your day-to-day life. **If you were going to create a tip sheet for child welfare and education professionals across the state on how they could more successfully collaborate with people from other systems, what top five tips would be on that tip sheet?**
 - a. Probes: What are the things that have worked for you in successful collaborations? How do your recommendations change based on geography and communities served? What are the recommendations you would make to the leadership in your system about how to promote these five things?
6. We've talked about a lot of things that do and don't work to promote collaboration across systems. **Now it's time to dream big and work together: Pretend money is no object. You as a group are tasked with redesigning the process of how school and county systems work together. What would the process look like?**

- a. Probes: What are the essential needs of both systems? How would it operate? Who would be in charge? What would professionals spend their time doing? How would resources be allocated? What would the focus of services be? Who would make decisions?
7. We've talked about a lot of things today. **Is there anything we missed that you want to make sure gets addressed in today's conversation?**